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SUBJECT: PROTESTANTISM INCREASINGLY AN ETHNIC MINORITY RELIGION IN  
NORTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) HANOI 100; B) 06 HANOI 3059; C) 06 HANOI 1112; D) 06 HANOI

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) Historically, although most of northern Vietnam's small population of Protestants were made up of ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh) people, Protestant growth amongst remote ethnic minority populations over the past 20 years has changed the demographics of the northern church. Today, the vast majority of Protestants in northern Vietnam belong to one of four ethnic minority groups, and most of Protestantism's growth in the north can be found in these communities. On the other hand, there is little or no growth among ethnic Kinh Vietnamese in the north. To tend to its growing ethnic minority membership, the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) needs a seminary to train new deacons and pastors, and is looking to build new churches as congregations start to register legally. End Summary.

H'mong Believers in the Majority...  
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¶2. (SBU) According to ECVN General Secretary Pastor Au Quang Vinh, the northern Protestant church organization now comprises 1,091 congregations (usually based in people's homes, hence the term "house church"), in addition to its original 15 legacy churches. (Note: Legacy churches are Protestant churches that existed in the north prior to 1954 and have remained "legal" and active since then. End Note.) Among these 1,091 congregations, ethnic H'mong in northern Vietnam and particularly the Northwest Highlands make up far and away the largest group. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of these are "Black H'mong." Numbers of H'mong adherents among northern provinces follow:

-- Dien Bien: 68,740 believers (10,726 families)  
-- Lao Cai: 11,230 believers (2,157 families)  
-- Ha Giang: 10,199 (1,732 families)  
-- Bac Kan: 5,577 believers (1,133 families)  
-- Cao Bang: 4,990 believers (1,149 families)  
-- Thanh Hoa: 3,234 believers (452 families)  
-- Tuyen Quang: 2,700 believers (642 families)  
-- Son La: 2,189 believers (319 families)  
-- Thai Nguyen: 1,892 believers (344 families)  
-- Lai Chau: 1,130 believers (169 families)  
-- Yen Bai: 429 believers (75 families)  
-- Lang Son: 292 believers (44 families)  
Total: 112,602 believers (89.2 percent of a total of 125,154 ECVN adherents)

...Red Dzao are the next largest group...

13. (SBU) The second largest ethnic group of ECVN believers are the "Red Dzao". There do not appear to be any "Black Dzao" adherents (despite the usual proximity of these two sub-groups of the Dzao people). By province, the number of Red Dzao adherents are:

-- Cao Bang: 4,440 believers (788 families)  
-- Dien Bien: 2,294 believers (393 families)  
-- Lao Cai: 417 believers (67 families)  
-- Bac Kan: 201 believers (35 families)  
-- Ha Giang: 160 believers (49 families)  
Total: 7,512 believers (5.9 percent of ECVN total)

...San Chi, Pa Then and Kinh are the remainder

14. (SBU) The next largest group comprises the San Chi. San Chi provincial numbers listed by order of size:

-- Cao Bang: 3,001 believers (536 families)  
-- Ha Giang: 2,646 believers (398 families)  
-- Dien Bien: 140 believers (28 families)  
Total: 5,787 believers (4.5 percent of ECVN total)

15. (SBU) There are 135 ethnic Pa Then adherents in Ha Giang Province, comprising 22 families. There are also three new ethnic Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) congregations residing in the coastal province of Quang Ninh, with 114 believers comprising only nine families.

ECVN Growth Also Largest Among Minorities

16. (SBU) The total number of non-legacy believers at the end of 2006

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was 126,154 individuals, or 21,267 families. Based on ECVN figures, this represents a 4.6 percent increase, or 5,168 converts, since the end of 2005. These converts are also primarily found among ethnic minority groups in northern Vietnam. The growth of the ECVN in northern Vietnam and the Northwest Highlands can be tracked as follows:

-- Dien Bien: 431 congregations (an increase of 1 since 2005)  
-- Cao Bang: 170 congregations (an increase of 26 since 2005)  
-- Lao Cai: 128 congregations (an increase of 6 since 2005)  
-- Ha Giang: 128 congregations (an increase of 2 since 2005)  
-- Bac Kan: 92 congregations (an increase of 8 since 2005)  
-- Tuyen Quang: 56 congregations (an increase of 5 since 2005)  
-- Thai Nguyen: 22 congregations (an increase of 6 since 2005)  
-- Thanh Hoa: 22 congregations (an increase of 1 since 2005)  
-- Son La: 20 congregations (no change)  
-- Lai Chau: 12 congregations (an increase of 7 since 2005)  
-- Yen Bai: five congregations (no change)  
-- Quang Ninh: three congregations (an increase of 2 since 2005)  
-- Lang Son: two congregations (no change)

17. (SBU) According to Pastor Vinh, these increases reflect the ECVN's bureaucratic process of identifying new congregations "as they develop". It is not clear how these new groups are being recruited, and ECVN representatives refuse to discuss their proselytizing efforts. (Note: There is anecdotal evidence that, in the 1980's and 1990's, the most significant evangelical missionary efforts in northern Vietnam were H'Mong language shortwave radio broadcasts originating in the Philippines. End Note.)

New Converts Among Ethnic Kinh More Limited

18. (SBU) Growth among ethnic Kinh Vietnamese converts is much slower than that of ethnic minorities, Vinh continued. For example, in central coastal Quang Ninh Province, the increase in the size of the

ECVN is almost entirely attributable to migrants from other parts of Vietnam or returnees from refugee camps in Hong Kong, where they converted. There is not a robust ECVN program to recruit new ethnic Vietnamese converts, and ECVN's legacy congregations are not growing, except through births. Several legacy congregations, especially the Vinh Phuc Province church, have recorded little growth as their congregations have aged and believers begin to die off, Vinh said.

#### Training and Property Issues

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¶9. (SBU) As the number of ECVN converts and congregations has grown, the need for trained pastors has increased as well. There are now only 14 trained pastors for the entire organization. Non-legacy churches are led by church deacons who, when possible, receive two weeks of training at the ECVN's headquarters facility in Hanoi. ECVN representatives have told us that the present facility is inadequate to house or train deacons in large numbers, and they hope to build a seminary for deacons and pastors at the Hanoi church site once it has resolved its ongoing land dispute with the city of Hanoi (Ref A). Vinh states that most other legacy church property problems "have been resolved," and the ECVN is gradually starting to focus on acquiring property to build new churches for newly registered congregations as they receive their registration certificates. The first new ECVN church built in the last few decades was inaugurated in Lang Son Province in November 2006 (Ref B).

#### Comment

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¶10. (SBU) Based on anecdotal evidence, and GVN references bordering on complaints, in recent years it would appear that the ECVN has had some form of ongoing missionary activity in northern Vietnam and the Northwest Highlands. The lion's share of this activity is likely undertaken by local community deacons, rather than Hanoi-based ethnic Vietnamese missionaries (who for the most part would not speak H'mong or other ethnic minority languages). Judging by the growth in total congregations and believers, ECVN proselytizing efforts in northern Vietnam may be most successful among Black H'mong communities in Lao Cai, Lai Chau, Bac Kan and Cao Bang provinces, possibly reflecting the more permissive religious freedom conditions in these localities (Ref C).

¶11. (SBU) Despite the church's growth in nearby provinces, Dien Bien Province continues to have the largest overall concentration of ECVN Protestants in the north, with more than half of the church's total adherents. It is notable that the ECVN has not been able to update its own statistics on Dien Bien since last year because of their difficulty contacting groups in the province. Historically, the

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locality has been one of the most problematic provinces on religious freedom in Vietnam's north (Ref D). We will continue to seek opportunities to visit Dien Bien's Protestant communities, as well as follow ECVN's growth elsewhere in the north. End Comment.

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